



Theology and the reality of ICMA

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A story is told of a young academic visiting Cambridge University to deliver a paper. Being young and it being Cambridge, one of *the* universities internationally, the young professor would of course have been inclined to pull out all the stops to impress. The host professor at Cambridge, when introducing the visiting speaker, put his arm around the young man and said: "We're all clever here. As I'm sure you are. So don't let's try to be clever. Just be kind. Be kind to us."

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Well, I am today relying on your kindness. And I pray that you will forgive me for being more kind than clever. For what I have to say is more from the heart than from the head, and is perhaps less theology than faith. But then, I am reassured that if it was an academic treatise the organisers wanted, they might have chosen any number of you for this presentation. I am aware that there are many gifted theologians in this room who would, then, have been better suited to this task. But I am also encouraged by a letter I received from Estonian Seamen's Mission's Eerik Joks, who composed that beautiful chant at the opening ceremony especially for our conference. Eerik is very involved with the ecumenical movement in Estonia. And what Eerik wrote was basically that I should be kind, more than clever. That today should be a celebration of the miracle of ICMA, rather than a cold-blooded academic exercise. Well, Eerik, I hope that I shall achieve that.

Let me also add that being at the ICMA Secretariat does not mean that I can speak on behalf of ICMA. Such is the nature of ICMA that none of us can really do that. So, these are my views which I am happy to share with you. Ever more reason then, for you to be kind...



Let me begin where ICMA begins and where ecumenism really happens. Strangely, ecumenism – that lofty biblically founded theology of the unity of the church, the body of Christ – ecumenism, when it happens right there where it matters most, is hardly even given a thought.

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Only in passing, perhaps, does a port chaplain contemplate ecumenism when setting off to the port for a regular day's work. If at all, the only reason for thinking theology that early in the morning is to remind oneself to be patient and tolerant towards the colleagues from rival societies. But even if we don't think about it much, it is there, in ports, at centres, on ships, where our shared Christian faith in one God is crucial. Here in ports ecumenism matters most. And the people most required to act upon this faith that we are one, are we, the port chaplains. We are required to believe we are one even while our daily reality contradicts that faith at every turn. It's where it matters most that ecumenism is most difficult to implement.

But that's where I learnt my lessons on the unity of our faith and the oneness of the church. Prior to that, working in a parish church I must admit I couldn't have been bothered all that much with ecumenism. Coming as I do from a country that was the pariah of the world, my church did not really care for ecumenical relations. At that time we were quite complacent. We were perfectly happy, thank you very much, at being isolated from the rest of the church, because we so staunchly believed that we were right, even if only we believed it.

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It was friendship that changed all that for me. I walked into a chaplains' meeting to be greeted by friendship. That friendship was based upon simple acknowledgment of my faith – which, coming to think of it was in itself quite remarkable – respect for my work, tolerance to my church and acceptance of my society, and most importantly, love for who I am and caring about where I was at – because I was not in a good place right then. This relationship was carefully cultivated by weekly worship, regular meetings of the team, tea and

biscuits and the occasional braai, and annual weekend retreats to a little resort down the coast at which we shared communion. The Durban chaplains' team has a special place in my heart and has shaped my belief in ICMA. Among them the unsung heroes of ICMA, Millen Adams (whom you might recall organised that fondly remembered ICMA World Conference in Durban), John Kunst (our chairman) and Mama Paddy Percival, none of whom, sadly, could be here this time. But their legacy is very real. They taught me that fellowship is where ecumenism is born.

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For me doing is believing. I do best what I believe in. From doing something in faith, I believe, there develops a practical theology. I am a fan of Don S. Browning, by the way. He wrote a book called *A Fundamental Practical Theology* back in 1996 in which he famously stated that theology is fundamentally practical. He meant that practice informs our thinking as much as what we think and believe informs what we do. And that applies also to when we formulate theology. I think that from this point of view it might just be possible to write a descriptive practical theology for ICMA too. A descriptive practical theology would contemplate and interpret what we already do and how we do it, in view of the faith we confess. That's how I came to understand ecumenism: from the love that the tiny faith community that was the Durban port chaplains' team freely gave to me, developed my belief that friendship and fellowship (fellowship is friendship given and received through faith) are the first requirements of ecumenical working. This, I think, is practical theology...

There is some risk in such a "practical" theology though. And let me mention it now lest you think I missed it. Everything we are and everything we do, our being and our actions, are informed by faith. The danger in the focus on practice is that we could accept faith as always being there in the background somewhere, deeply embedded in all we do. For all intent and purposes faith could be ignored really, so that we might get on with the action, with the business of seafarers' welfare. Now that would be sad. Our work would cease



to be faith-work, and port chaplaincy would be a secular enterprise. Really, we need the right balance. I like to say that our work is faith-based. But I hope to explain that later...

One more warning here at the outset, and a plea for your understanding: I am as committed a Calvinist as I am ecumenical. That might be contradictory, theologically, I really don't know. Philosophically I agree with Hegel who understands reality as beset with contradictory opposites, both being simultaneously true. And living life is the gentle art of negotiating one's own path between the two. Without going into that too much, let me just warn you then that my brand of theology will always be informed by my Protestant education, while I shall always seek unity in God's work among us and aspire to find unanimity in all our responses to God.

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Structure

Now let me back track just a little to give you some idea of the structure of my presentation. I am no systematic theologian, but I want you to follow where I'm headed. I have said this before, and it is by no means a profound truth, but then again neither is it easy: that port chaplains have to be good at one particular daily balancing act. Well, two balancing acts if you count climbing gangways without holding on to the railing to save your hands from getting greased. We have to be good at balancing in our minds three relationships simultaneously, or three contexts, if you like. Three different worlds seem to intersect in the person of a port chaplain. In fact this conference was loosely based on the same principle. Going about our daily business we have to link up in our minds three realities:

1. Our own faith-world
2. A seafarers' life-world
3. The world of maritime trade and industry

Let's take them one by one to see if you agree.



Our own faith-world.

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First of all, *our* faith and of course all that comes with our confessions of faith, all of it goes to make up our faith world. Our own personal grace-relationship with the Father, our dependence upon Jesus Christ, our reliance upon the Holy Spirit, all of that matters here. Being captivated by our own faith tradition, being committed to our own church and being loyal to our own faith community. This is our reality. But then to discover that we are neither unique nor alone. We share this work-place, even more fundamentally, we

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share the same calling from one God to care for seafarers... (Ah, let me say this again to make sure you get this, because 40 years ago I might have been ostracised for saying it! And yes, I could very well have said it 40 years ago, it's that recent. Sadly I am now older than 40! Only a little bit older though... Thankfully I am younger than a hundred, for there is just a chance that I might have been burnt at the stake then!) The point is: it's frightfully recent that we could not possibly have said publically: we care for seafarers because we share equally in God's mission to the world. Because, quite shockingly, those with whom we now single-mindedly share that mission of God to the people of the sea, come from the opposite side of the schism. I mean, these are people with whom we would not normally agree, nor share liturgically, and yet we have God in common. That in itself is a tricky piece of reality to get your head around. To make it work is even more difficult. But you and I know what, quite miraculously, it does. It works. Look around you. It's never easy. And proof of that is written in ICMA's mission statement: that it is ICMA's objective to inspire tolerance. Don't be mistaken, we are asked to pledge tolerance not to the world, but to one another. And tolerance is acquired by learning. Human relationships are never done and dusted. Like in marriage the hard work starts only after the wedding reception has been cleaned up. As in marriage, we the church and the bride of Christ is difficult to please.

Remember that we're still considering how important our own world of faith is to us. Ecumenism becomes an issue when this safe haven of our own little bubble is punctured by someone from beyond. Well there you go, I have said it, haven't I? I have said what is most difficult for us. We are forced to deal with it when someone else from out there comes knocking: when we encounter the worlds of others our own world diminishes in size and importance: our own little bubble... Our world is smaller than we believe. We learn tolerance when our worlds collide. And ecumenism is how we deal with that existential crisis. Ecumenism needs more contemplation here in ICMA.

Before I lose myself in ecumenism as though this first world in which we live is dominated by denominations, let me just for a moment return to what I have called our own faith. Our faith is a very personal reality. Yes it has theological precedence (our faith is the work of God's Spirit, and not our own achievement), and it even has communal origins (we believe because our parents believe, and our upbringing reinforces it) and yes our faith has public significance (there is no such thing as a faith that stays privately hidden), but in our experience faith occurs to us first in our inner being. Faith determines our being.

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That's why faith is fundamental. Faith governs who we are as much as what we do, how we do things and why we do them. The metaphor Jesus uses of the tree bearing fruit is relevant here. Therefore, I believe that what we do in caring for seafarers reflects who we are. I have been repeating myself, but bear with me.

Let's unpack this a bit because it is important to note both what I have said and what I have not intended to say at all. I want it noted that I have not said that our work is driven by whom we think seafarers are and what we expect them to become. Our involvement in this ministry is not due to seafarers' lack of faith nor is it due to an abundance of faith among people of the sea. We care for the wellbeing of seafarers because of who we are not because of who they are. It is we who have the faith that inspires us to serve God, not seafarers



who lack faith so that we approach them only to change them. We are driven by our own faith to serve God's world unconditionally.

We start out with faith, faith and the conviction that God sends us to care pastorally for this particular community in God's world: hence faith-based. Faith is our foundation; faith comes at the beginning of what we do, not at the end. We're not in it to move seafarers to faith just as we believe. We are moved by God to follow God's movement into his world. God sends us as He has sent his Son into the world. We follow God's mission. That is why we call ourselves missions, and how we understand our mission ("sending" in my language).

Of course God's objective is to reconcile with all of humanity, I hear you object. But that only God himself can achieve and it's a job best left to God, through Christ and his Spirit. In being where God is moving to, among the people whom he has declared he loves, we are fulfilling our part of the Great Commission. Now that, I know, is not yet the whole story, but I'll come to that. Let me first say that in terms of our first context, this world created for us by our own faith, it is here that God nurtures and equips us for the moment that we step out of our own world into the worlds of others. For step out of it we will. But the motivation to step into the world out there is not that the world over there is hopelessly lost. Our motivation to meet the outside world where it finds itself, comes from the new life God has given us in the new world created for us in Christ. Stepping out of our own worlds and entering the world of others is the move from the pastorate to the apostolate. It happens because "my cup runneth over".

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A Seafarers' life world

The second of these worlds that we juggle is a seafarer's world; a seafarer's world. That, I think, is significant to note: it is a seafarer's world, not mine, nor yours, but someone else's world. The moment one ventures out from one's

own world there are rules of engagement. So coming to think of it “juggling” is not the right word for what we do. Let’s not take anyone lightly. There is something to be said for approaching someone playfully. But let’s not play games with other people’s lives. Our faith makes it simple: Love is how we live together. Enter other people’s lives with love, no matter if they are much deserving of love. Love anyway. That’s what we said in getting to understand our own world, isn’t it? That we do what we do because of what we are: we are faith-based, faith-driven. We love because God loved us even before we started loving Him back. So, when knocking on the door of a seafarer’s world we wait to be invited in. And once inside we enter only the common rooms, not the private spaces if we are not invited there, and we sometimes leave our shoes at the door.

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Why a seafarers’ world? I believe that God has somehow identified for us the people to whom he wants us to direct his loving care: the people of the sea. Only you will know why you have dedicated your life to seafarers. But I am pretty sure most of us will have a story to tell of how God guided us to the people of the sea. For me it was a faith decision. I believe seafarers matter to God. I believe I should love seafarers, because God loved them first. That is what makes ICMA a valuable resource in the seafarers’ welfare sector. We have good reason to deliver the best quality in care, even before we have managed to describe theologically our commitment to people of the sea, simply due to faith.

For me there is good reason for the roundabout reference to seafarers as “people of the sea”. I remind myself all the time that seafarers are people. Seafarers are whole people. Seafarers are not mere instruments of labour, nor merely the human element: that weakest link in the chain where safety fails. Nor are seafarers down and out, to be patronised and pitied and cared for because they’re dependent upon welfare; nor are they always victims of injustice, always in the right or never to be questioned. These are all intolerable reductionist views which do not correspond with Christian theology

on human wholeness. We award seafarers their dignity when we engage with seafarers as we should relate to all people: acknowledging wholeness. We are staunchly critical, are we not, of any industry or political order that reduces our humanity to our useful parts. So then, let us be careful not to treat seafarers just as disrespectfully. We are from the religious industry. Our interest in seafarers could be easily construed as being only aimed at, or even limited to Christianizing them all. I would suggest that we in the business of faith should take care not to contribute to the perception that we relate to seafarers only to convert them. In fact we should not focus only upon their spirituality as though that is all they are and all they'll get from us. Do that and we become self-serving, serving neither seafarers nor God. Our interaction with seafarers hinges on sound Christian anthropology. Human dignity is acknowledged in wholeness. That is how we have been created by God and recreated by Christ and the Spirit.

If our duty of care is to be rooted in our own faith, we must treat the people of the sea as neighbours (“naastes”): as persons who not only are fully human, but also the creation of the same God whom we serve. Even those who seem less worthy – perhaps precisely those who are not worthy – are recipients of God’s grace. Our being sent to meet them, is God on his mission. And here I am, sharing in it. That’s why I serve people of the sea.

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But even God’s sanction to venture into another’s world, does not make it simple. Entering another’s world is fraught with risk and difficulty. One can do much harm. Moving into seafarers’ workplace is to venture into their life-space. If a ship is a seafarer’s home and we are, at best, their guests, however hospitable they might receive us, then entering into a seafarer’s mind and faith, life and loves, space and property, rights, labour relations and career prospects, is to tread on sacred ground. We would do well to remember where and why angels fear to tread. We must keep to our limited role.

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Meeting seafarers where they are, in their world, is the minefield of pastoral care. Or is it even pastoral care?

Do let's not assume that we understand fully pastoral care. We need to research the theology of pastoral care and we need ongoing training on spiritual counsel and brief counselling techniques. Not only because the discipline of practical theology is rapidly evolving, but also because this is where that little matter of the Great Commission niggles at the conscience, right? ICMA members grapple with this theological question: Is working with seafarers really pastoral care or have we crossed the frontier to the apostolate? Are we in the church or outside of it? Are we disciple-ing or not. If not, are we in breach of God's Great Commission?

The controversy here exists among ICMA members and certainly also manifests itself in the slight discomfort of ICMA partner organisations. It exists in ICMA because we all have different answers to what the Great Commission requires of us, and we have different expectations of one another's delivery of that outcome.

I would suggest that there is another way to look at seafarers' ministry other than through the lens of the Great Commission. Perhaps the question to consider is: are there other biblical models for a ministry to seafarers besides mission ("sending" / proselytising)? Do we have to justify all our work among seafarers from this one paradigm of making disciples? Or could our engagement with seafarers also be diaconal care? Could we not simply be caring for the lowliest in God's kingdom? Could we simply be obeying God's command to be salt for the earth?

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It was Ken Peters who said in Penang last year: "What we're doing in engaging with seafarers is creating a moment of church". To me it means that we bring God's presence to people and situations which could not have felt less like church. But being church, besides apostolic witness and prophetic advocacy, is

also about being loving and caring. We can be diaconal. In fact we are spoilt for choice of biblical models for seafarers' ministry.

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The Christian Seaman's Organisation is perhaps a case in point of one who has acted upon this choice: it chooses to focus on ship visiting and pastoral care with an apostolic objective. While doing so, CSO acknowledges that what they do cannot be all that seafarers need done, that CSO can choose to focus on a spiritual agenda for its operations only because other ICMA members with whom they work closely in the same ports are doing what else is required to care for seafarers needs effectively. They call their design of ministry complementary. Does this mean then that ICMA members who focus on maintaining services at drop in and seafarers' centres are less obedient to God, or could they be simply delivering what else God requires besides the Great Commission? I think the latter. If the tolerance that ICMA's mission statement calls ICMA's objective is still relevant, then this tolerance applies not only to our complementary work alongside other faith traditions, but also to acknowledge the legitimacy of other *modus operandi*, no, the biblical foundation of alternative models of ministry. If parish churches offer tea after Sunday services (mine offers wine by the way: very civilised, I think!) then seafarers could be offered drinks at their "churches", our seafarers' centres.

In short, I do not think that we can justifiably limit our paradigm to serve seafarers to a single verse of Scripture, even if that verse is the Great Commission of Mathew's gospel, ignoring the rest of the Bible. That would be irresponsibly selective.

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Significantly some of us call ourselves chaplains. Chaplains are found where you will not find parish priests and ministers. Fact is, you don't find chaplains in churches. You would encounter them in health care institutions, schools and universities, in armies, in corporate companies, local and even national authorities. And, lo and behold, in ports. Chaplains bring that moment of church to communities who are precisely not in the church. I wish I could read

to you Naomi Paget and Janet McCormack's book, *The Work of the Chaplain*, from back to front. Matthew 25 is central to their paradigm on chaplain's ministries. Jesus there teaches on the value of all people, and the requirement that the righteous minister to all people, even the least in God's world. Marion Gibson pointed out to me this passage (page 81). If this is the care to be provided in crisis, then it could also be the essence of all care to seafarers. The point is: the paradigm of chaplaincy is as much a way of being and a means of engagement for seafarers' ministers as proselytising may be.

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But entering a seafarers' world has its limitations, because of who and what we are not, in spite of what seafarers need. Seafarers very often do not need us, but need someone else. We are not doctors. We are not psychologists. We are not lawyers. We are not union representatives. We are not shipping agents. We are not travel agents. We are not bankers. And however much we want to be all these things, and even though we have much experience of so many things that seafarers want and need, we are pastors. We are religious and spiritual experts. But in spite of our expertise at the Christian faith's spirituality we may know very little, perhaps of Islam, Hinduism and the other great faiths among seafarers. But do Protestants fully understand Catholic spirituality? Or do Catholics fully understand the spirituality of charismatics? Do the evangelicals fully comprehend the ecumenicals? I think not. We are pastors, and we share with one another and with some seafarers the same Christian faith. But we are at best first responders. Heh, do not let that sound superficial. We are very professional at being first responders. "Today chaplaincy continues to provide for the spiritual needs of all people in a way that no other established religious group can." I quote from Paget and McCormack (p 4). I think that applies to us! But we like to talk ourselves up: we like to present ourselves as counsellors, even trauma counsellors. Let's be honest, no amount of training we have had up to this point within ICMA make us able to deal with post traumatic syndrome. It is a described medical condition, and none of us are doctors. You would not attempt open heart surgery would you? Do not tamper with things you cannot understand. We

are so well meaning though. We are so concerned for seafarers in crisis, after piracy and other tragedies, that we barge in pretending to know – even believing that we are able to provide – what they need. So somewhere in the process of the provision of care we need ourselves to have faith in the Holy Spirit's ultimate control of the process to refer seafarers to other better equipped professionals. Not only are we realising that we cannot make a person whole with pastoral care, that we have but a small part to play in their lives and others will continue the work and see its fruit, our limitations also require the interventions of other professionals from other disciplines.

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It boils down to what you expect to find there, isn't it, in that other person's life and world. What do we go looking for there? What do we intend to do about it? Do we go looking for faith, and failing to find it, promptly proceed to hit the install button? Our expectation of what lies beyond our own world in another's life often governs how we treat others and how we conduct ourselves. I have experience of how God revealed my expectation to me, a rather crippling expectation it was too. Again I am back to my own story, forgive me, but I think it's relevant here.

I remember when I started port ministry. I had been given a tiny hatchback car by CSO to get around the port. Mornings I used to drive onto the quay (one could still do it in those days) park at the water's edge at the bow of a ship. I remember vividly sitting in my Opel Cadet looking up at the towering cranes and at the massive bulk of the ship several storeys above me. It was more than daunting: it was downright frightening. I would sit there and pray for longer than I would before stepping onto my pulpit on Sundays. The seafarers' world just seemed insurmountably huge. And I remember what I prayed for over and over again: God, don't leave me. God, go with me. I was overwhelmed by my responsibility: I was to take God onboard. And it never got better. Because the days that I went back home feeling a miserable failure were too many to allow me to become complacent. In 2004, my society sent me to New Orleans, to take a closer look at ICMA so that we might consider joining. Many people

have criticism of that conference. It was my first, and I remember my jaw dropping at the sight of so many port chaplains. Oh, I knew there were port chaplains elsewhere, but so many of them? Perhaps my feelings of isolation were delusional after all. There was a workshop in New Orleans to be led by Reverend Jaakko Laasio and Father Andre Quintelier. That day changed my life. And I can still remember the single sentence that did it. It was Father Andre who said: we do not go onboard to take God to seafarers. Because God is already there. We go onboard to meet God. That may not seem profound to you, but it changed my life. And perhaps it has helped me to make a few seafarers aware that they are not alone either.

One more world remains to be juggled.

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The world of the maritime industry.

This is not the welcoming world of friendly Filipino's, mind. This is the cold hard real world of business and money, loads of it, or the loss of it we're led to believe. It is the world of international trade, of profit and loss, of supply and demand, of greed, consumerism and ultimately materialism. It is a merciless environment. It is as unpredictable as its share price, as unscrupulous as its politicians and as violent as its pirates. It is not a place where human dignity thrives.

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In this world there is a place for a prophetic witness to justice and advocacy. An independent voice, that speaks up fearlessly for the wholeness of people of the sea, their rights, their wellbeing, their very humanness.

It is a world where grace is a haven, hospitality is a miracle and dignity is a moment of church. These are the gifts we bear from God. Grace, love and faith.

It is in this world that we rise up for justice. But don't be mistaken, justice is not universally attractive. It is in this context that love is consistently crucified

and rarely survives. Love on God's terms is not generally invited. ICMA is not always welcomed with open arms. In this world faith itself is suspect and shameful.

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Is that our cue to leave the stage? No. If there is a human side to this industry, we are it.

But let's be frank: port authorities and shipping companies do not look favourably on port chaplains because we're Christian. Nor because we're admirably humane. If they look at us favourably at all it is because they gain from us a healthier and happier crew for very little investment.

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Most of the time we're a problem. There is here the theological conundrum of giving in to the world and disappearing into it, enslaved to its agenda, or to passionately fight it tooth and nail as though it is Satan incarnate, or to engage with it, to understand its agenda, to partner and to collaborate and to celebrate its achievements, walk the distance and a bit, but also to keep the distance, the identity and integrity of God's agent for justice and God's advocate for undeserving yet valued-by-God human beings. We all do this differently. Do let's not frown upon one another's relationship with the world to get the job done. But do let's make ourselves unmissable in a world where we're unique.

There are ways and means of engaging with this world of the maritime industry, from taking high office in the ILO and IMO to cultivating free access to the port captain's coffee machine, from getting through port gates to getting past the deck watch. There is need for an integration with the world, being not from it but most certainly in it.

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Our members have forged relations with this industry. We are known as a resource, accepted as partners and even handsomely supported.

But the terms are those set by the industry, whether ISPS Code, TWIC Cards, or grant conditions, we don't call the shots. It is here in this world that professionalism in chaplaincy counts. Our integrity is vital. Our service delivery is valued. Some members have been employed and are supported by the industry, having convinced the industry of the difference a chaplain makes. Costa uses AoS, the Dutch dredgers the SPWO, the United States Government the SCI. After recent earthquakes in New Zealand an ICMA chaplain sailed with a ship that was in the port of Christchurch when the city crumbled, in support of passengers and crew.

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The ties with the industry should be nurtured not for their own sake, but for the doors it opens to seafarers.

In closing...

I come to the end of my presentation. I realise again this is no theology, not even the descriptive sort, and most certainly not of the systematic variety either. But I warned you of that. I know I have not made any real contribution to our self-understanding. I have rambled on, perhaps, losing you somewhere after the second page. But I have today dared to call you my friends, and I have relied on your kindness to ask fundamental questions which could be as disconcerting as they are stimulating. I have been irritating, I know, besides talking for too long I have asked more questions than given answers, and perhaps you feel more discomfort right now than peace of mind.

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But consider this: the miracle of ICMA is but 40 years old. Did you think that we would sort out our often violent past differences in just four decades? Surely not! This is the amazing thing: that ICMA exists at all, and that ecumenical working put ecumenism to work here as nowhere else in Christendom. You are participating in a miracle.

I pray that God the Father blesses us with his Holy Spirit's gift of faith in Jesus his Christ. I pray that love will have the last word among us. I pray that



together we will be a voice for seafarers. I pray that seafarers and their families will learn to rely on the Christian ministries to seafarers gathered here. And I pray that the maritime industry will recognise our professionalism in faith-based care. I pray that the maritime industry will return dignity to humanity. And I pray for your fulfilment and for you peace in doing what you must do for God and seafarers. I pray that you never give up.

Hennie la Grange

22 August 2011